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THE BOOK OF THE MONTH¹

BY F. M. COLBY

IN one of those breathless articles on the "modern spirit" and the way we speed along, an American college professor not long ago placed Mr. H. G. Wells well at the fore of a little group of British novelists who, he said, are completely revolutionizing taste. Among the others I recall the names of Messrs. Arnold Bennett, John Galsworthy, Eden Phillpotts, W. J. Locke, and Maurice Hewlett. All of them, said he, were applying the "direct gaze of the intellect" to all the facts of life. All were filled with the "compelling modern spirit" that sought only the naked truth and spurned the "indirections that have hitherto been accounted the signs of good taste." The professor declared himself a good deal shaken by their audacities. He said they snatched him away to the North Pole of intellectual experience, to the outermost boundaries of knowledge, and, though a strong man, he could not help quaking; but awful as it was, he found it exhilarating. The most terrible of them all, he said, was Mr. H. G. Wells, not because he had more faith than the others in this new and dangerous beauty, or because his audacities were rather more flagrant than any that the world has ever known heretofore, but because he best expressed the true inwardness of "modernity." He added that *The New Machiavelli* may be considered "the *pons asinorum* of modernism."

Now I do not deny that a man may quake on reading the latest novels of Mr. H. G. Wells (though I doubt it), but I do maintain that no healthy person was ever known to tremble on reading the other writers mentioned in this group. No man should trust himself again to hunt the big game of literature who has ever shown the slightest trace

¹By H. G. Wells. Harper & Brothers: New York and London, 1913.

of buck-fever on encountering a Bennett or a Phillpotts or a W. J. Locke. As time goes on almost any one may learn to regard with comparative complacency the terrific onward modern plunges of the British novelist of last week. The thing would not be worth mentioning if it were not so typical of our writings on "modernity." We spend a large part of our time, in print at least, in expressing amazement at the modern man's "modernity." Excitable commentators, like this college professor, start up every little while, and exclaim with astonishment and sometimes alarm at the contemporaneity of their contemporaries.

The audacities and modernities of Mr. Wells in no wise account for the hold he has on our attention. Thoughts just as bold and newly dated have often put us fast asleep. In books it is not the progress that is exciting, it is the person you are progressing with. This is a day of prosy iconoclasms, when some of the dumbest people ever known will blaze away at God, government, the family, and the moral sense with the most violent intentions and the drowsiest results. But Mr. Wells is so good company that we gladly go with him in any direction he may choose. He has the gift of making things seem new when they are not. He is wonderfully swift and sweeping. It took him only about six weeks to despatch *The Future of America*. In the opening essay of *Socialism and the Great State*, by no means a long paper, he crisply outlined the history of the entire human race down to the present day, showed what the trouble was, and pointed out the remedy; then at the end summed up the whole matter in a neat diagram, a sort of little time-table of destiny for a busy man to paste in his hat. It ran from complete savagery to the Great Solution two thousand years hence, and was not more than five inches long. Then there was a spirited series of papers on "The Labor Unrest" going straight to the root of that difficulty, and meanwhile he had shot his mind back among the shiny beings of the Carboniferous period and on to the time when man, half-angel, should stand laughing and stretch his hand to the stars, and he lectured on the stages in between before some learned body. But from these items you would not infer Mr. Wells. You might not infer a man at all, but only an Index to Periodicals. The really wonderful thing is not so much that Mr. Wells takes these flights as that he takes you with him. And he is so charm-

ing a person that if, instead of progress and modernity and the rephrasing of our tea-table radicalism, he went back two centuries for his thoughts, it would make little difference to us. Mr. Chesterton goes back to the Middle Ages for his thoughts, and Mr. Chesterton is even more exciting.

Stratton, the hero of *The Passionate Friend*, was "one of those strange men who take high and sweeping views—as larks soar." So, it will be remembered, was the hero of *The New Machiavelli*, who found human affairs in a sad jumble and published the *Blue Weekly* to straighten them. So, too, was the hero of *Marriage*, who found the "empire and the monarchy and Lords and Commons and patriotism and social reform and all the rest of it silly, *silly*, beyond words," and went to Labrador "to think it out." Stratton passes through precisely the same intellectual experience. He began by believing in the Empire and in the significance of current politics. He thought that the Englishman was better than any other sort of man, that British civilization was the chief hope of the world, that German civilization was only its envious shadow.

His next phase was a belief in Efficiency. That was after five years in South Africa, spent first in active service during the Boer War, and later in the work of repatriation. The war put an end forever to all faith in the innate British superiority.

Then came the labor troubles of the Rand. There the problem was not particularly South African, but world-wide. What was to be done about it? The only answer he found was Efficiency. But gradually he came to see that the real quarrel was with the entire economic system of to-day. He came to see that Europe was "no more than the dog's-eared corner of the page of history." He began to ask himself such questions as What is humanity as a whole doing? and, What is the nature of the world process? He determined that he would no longer be a mere Englishman or European, or even a "mere denizen of Christendom." He would thenceforth be a "world-man," and to that end spends two years in Asia and six months in America. With patience he achieves a bird's-eye view of both these Continents, and returns to Europe with some of the broadest generalizations ever known. In India he has traversed all history from its beginning. He sees that Civilization is a "mere flourish out of barbarism." The last attempt of the

onward impulse of mankind has produced Bombay and Calcutta, which are merely "vast feverish pustules upon the face of the peninsula." But everywhere are ruins which prove the futility of Civilization's past attempts. There are six extinguished Delhis. Who shall say that this is the last? But he believes the present time is different. Vast new constructive forces are at work. Never before has there been so much clear and critical thought in the world. Mankind is now entering on a new phase of living. The problem of humanity is no longer economic, but psychological. Already we have come to plenty. "There is enough for every one, and only a fool can be found to deny it." But we are still using the methods of the time when there was not enough for every one. The problem now is to make our present plenty "go round, and *keep it enough*, while we do."

Then the hero has a vision of the Great State very similar to that set forth in Mr. Wells's essay on the subject and a vision of the world to come like that presented to the learned body by Mr. Wells in his lecture on the *Discovery of the Future*; and there are passages of great eloquence and fire and some shrewd criticisms of current people and things. But there is always something of a jolt when Mr. Wells's builders of the future actually begin to build. Stratton's first step toward world regeneration is the organization of a huge international publishing company which is to sell at moderate prices the best books in all languages with translations, to control newspapers and magazines, with a view to preventing international misunderstandings, and to aid in all possible ways in peace movements and good causes generally.

As to the story itself, it turns on the tempestuous love of Stratton for the beautiful and charming Lady Mary Christian, who, though she returns his love, refuses to marry him on account of his poverty. She fears that if she marries him she will become his "squaw." She wishes to be powerful and splendid, and she marries a very rich man, who promises to make no demands on her and leave her freedom. This she construes as freedom to be with Stratton when she chooses. Entanglements follow, and Stratton, who has meanwhile married a thoroughly virtuous and loyal young woman, is threatened with a divorce suit and ruin, but the Lady Mary commits suicide and saves him. This bare outline is altogether misleading. It merely shows the

absurdity of stripping a Wells novel to its plot. Yet half a dozen stodgy British reviewers are at this moment doing it, and two of them, whom I have just now read, are saying that such a story will never do. No "nice" woman would ever behave as did the Lady Mary, and that is all there is to be said.

Of course the essential thing in a Wells novel is not the plot or the situation. It is not whether a character is hanged or happily married, or behaves, on the whole, nicely or quite the reverse. The main point is that he creates people about whom one cares. He does not, like an American best seller, merely swear that his people are remarkable or interesting. He contrives an illusion in the reader's mind that they are so.

The Lady Mary Christian really does seem too good for the ordinary purposes of the usual marriage. She argues rather well against masculine appropriation:

"And I don't *want* to be your squaw. I don't want that at all. It isn't how I feel for you. I don't *want* to be your servant and possession. . . . Oh! Stephen dear, can't there be love—love without this clutching, this gripping, this carrying off? . . . Don't you see how much better that is for you and for me—and for the world and our lives? I don't want you to become a horrible little specialist in feeding and keeping me. . . . If I were to come now and marry you, it wouldn't help you. It would turn you into a wife-keeper, into the sort of uninteresting preoccupied man one sees running after and gloating over the woman he's bought—at the price of his money and his dignity and everything."

And as to sex jealousy:

"This tremendous force which seizes us and says to us, 'Make that other being yours, bodily yours, mentally yours, wholly yours—at any price, no matter the price,' bars all our unifications. It splits the whole world into couples watching each other. Until all our laws, all our customs seem the servants of that. . . . Here are we two, I and you, barred for ever from the sight of one another, and I and you writing—I, at any rate—in spite of the ill-concealed resentment of my partner. We're just two, peeping through our bars, of a universal multitude. Everywhere this prison of sex. . . . I can understand so well now that feminine attitude that implies, 'Well, if I must have a master, then the more of a master the better?' Perhaps that is the way; that Nature will not let us poor humans get away from sex, and I am merely—what is it?—an abnormality—with whiskers of inquiry sprouting from my mind. Yet I don't feel like that."

In short, so far as Mr. Wells's ideas are concerned, they are merely the ideas in the air, and there is no great audacity

in presenting them. That is merely to blow back our own breath into our faces. But when, instead of writing about the entire Human Race, he chooses to portray some members of it, he is very successful indeed. "Modernity" is an accidental quality of his books, having no more to do with their essential worth than has the day of the month on which they were printed. And as to his boldness in the treatment of sex which so embarrassed our college professor, no man will be in the least disturbed who has not turned genteel in his very insides, and that, of course, is improbable. *The New Machiavelli*, *Marriage*, and his latest books are the lineal successors to many a good, spacious British novel of the past. Their kinship to these, especially to Meredith's *The Conqueror*, is far more conspicuous than any revolutionary quality. Of course they contain a good deal of sheer modern impudence, as when Plato is dismissed as a journalist and all classic learning is brushed aside, along with Christianity, and indeed everything that preceded the dates of publication. And to-day's superstitions are substituted for yesterday's superstition, and there is an absurd tendency to deify the middle of next week—not a very interesting object of worship. Yet, all said, they do create a world of fancy, and it is no harm if he rules it with his whims. His characters are very agreeable in spite of their quite superfluous Atlantean anxieties; and in this last novel the world-uplifting hero has at least the grace to say that he is not quite sure of his broadest generalizations.

F. M. COLBY.